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## THIRTY-THREE YEARS OF HISTORY ACTIVITIES

BY J. M. GUINN

*Read at the meeting of the Pacific Branch of the American Historical Association, San Diego, December 2, 1916.*

Local historical societies are growing in importance as the cities and districts in which they are located age in years and increase in population.

The trials, tribulations and successes of one of these that has survived a third of a century and bids fair to be the chronicler of events in its particular field for centuries to come may be interesting and valuable to historians ambitious to become the founders of similar institutions. The first local historical society founded in California that has become a permanent institution and is also the oldest historical society in any State west of the Rocky Mountains was organized in Los Angeles thirty-three years ago.

On the evening of November 1, 1883, a little coterie of representative men met in a room in old Temple Block to form a historical society. Their names are as follows: Col. J. J. Warner, Don Antonio F. Coronel, ex-Governor John G. Downey, Gen. John Mansfield, Col. E. W. Jones, Prof. Ira Moore, Prof. Marcus Baker, James M. Guinn, C. N. Wilson, John B. Niles, Henry D. Barrows, Noah Levering, August Kohler, George Hansen and A. J. Bradfield. At an adjourned meeting the following were added to the roll of founders: Dr. J. P. Widney, Gen. Volney E. Howard, J. Q. A. Stanley, Edwin Baxter, George Butler Griffin, Horatio N. Rust and J. W. Redway. Of these twenty-two founders but three are living: Col. E. W. Jones, Dr. J. P. Widney and J. M. Guinn. Only one of them, J. M. Guinn, is now a member of the Society. Some of these men were new-comers, others were pioneers whose residence in the city covered periods of thirty, forty and fifty years. These had seen it grow from a little Mexican pueblo to a flourishing American city; had witnessed its transition from the inchoate and revolutionary domination of Mexico to the stable rule of the United States.

The object for which these men had met was clearly stated in the call, but the scope, the purpose and the province of an historical society were not very clear to them. There were those in that assemblage who doubted whether a society purely historical could

be maintained. There was not enough material in the city's history to arouse and to sustain an interest in the Society's proceedings. These argued that it would be better to organize a Society, dual in its purpose, part historical and part scientific. A few weeks later when a constitution was evolved, among the objects for which the Society was created were "the discussion of historical subjects, the reading of such papers and the trial of such scientific experiments as shall be determined by the General Committee." The Society was christened "The Historical Society of Southern California." The author of the constitution and the sponsor for the name was an enthusiastic State divisionist. He had hopes that when the illusory State of Southern California materialized into a commonwealth, our organization would become its State historical society. This General Committee deserves a passing notice. It was an autocratic decemvirate—a body of ten—that supervised the affairs of the Society. It decided who should become members, what papers should be read, what experiments tried and who should be admitted to the Society's meetings. It never tried a scientific experiment and censored but one paper, and that raised the wrath of its author above the boiling point and an explosion followed that eventually censored, by an amendment to the constitution, the General Committee out of existence.

The formation of our Society came at an opportune time in the city's history. Two years before—to be exact, September 4, 1881—the city had celebrated with considerable pomp and parade the hundredth anniversary of its founding. Before our Society, at its organization, stretched away back a century of ungleamed history. The only attempt to write a history of the city, up to that time, was the centennial history of the City and County, written by J. J. Warner, Benjamin Hayes and J. P. Widney in 1876. It was a fairly good history what there was of it. It condensed the story of a century into seventy-two pages.

That centennial celebration was a quaint mixture of the past and the present, a curious blending of the new with the old. In the procession rode the graceful cabellero on his silver-mounted saddle. Following the horsemen, came fashionable coupes and family carriages. Then came the weather-stained and travel-battered emigrant wagons of '49 and the early '50's fitted out with all the impedimenta that belonged to a trip the "plains across" even to the frowsy headed children peeping out from under the wagon covers, but they were home products of a recent date. The automobile was not in evidence.

In a creaking old wooden-wheeled carreta, the last of its kind, rode Benita, an ancient Indian lady reputed to be 115 years old. She was the belle of Yangna, the Indian Village down by the river,

when Los Angeles was born. She had witnessed the ceremonial founding of the little pueblo by Governor Felipe de Neve and the priests of San Gabriel, just a century before. No doubt she had dumbly wondered what it all meant. She had lived to realize that it meant the extinction of her people. She and her century-old companion who rode by her side were the last of their race.

Our Society early in its life was inspired with an ambition to purify history of the myth and fiction with which it is adulterated. In the first year of its existence it provided its Secretary with a "Historical Tablet, in which shall be recorded the corrections of Apocryphal History, both local and general." Our Secretary, then George Butler Griffin, was a stickler for pure history. After a number of attempts to purify our local history of the numerous fictions incorporated into it he gave up in despair.

The particular *bete noir* that annoyed us at that time was the alleged Fremont Headquarters—an old adobe house on South Main Street, two miles below the then business center. Periodically its picture appeared in the local pictorial papers and it even crossed the continent and showed up in Eastern illustrated journals. Its appearance was usually accompanied by a historical context more or less erroneous according to the space the author had at his command. It was then occupied by a Chinese laundry. The Mongolian proprietor frequently exhausted all the expletives in the Chinese vocabulary on the souvenir hunters who were carrying away his domicile piecemeal for historical relics. The march of improvement finally overtook the old adobe and trampled it into dust.

This in brief is its history: It was built five or six years after Fremont and his battalion were out of the service of the United States. In 1856 when Fremont was a candidate for the presidency, a party opened a saloon in the building and named his resort "Fremont's Headquarters." In the three decades of our Society's existence some of us have tried to exorcise other of these phantoms of illusory history, but, like Banquo's ghost, they would not down at our bidding. A company of real estate promoters once offered to build a hall for our Society inclosing the old adobe, provided we would indorse the scheme and help them to sell stock. The hall was not built.

Although a transformation had been steadily going on in its civic and social conditions, Los Angeles at the beginning of its second century still retained some of its old pueblo customs. The Mayor had taken the place of the Alcalde and the Court of First Instance had become the Police Court; the Mayor still acted as Judge, and Monday, as of old, was judgment day.

The fire department had recently been re-constructed. The bucket brigade and the old hand brake machine had given place

to a steam fire engine, and a bell had been substituted for the old alarm system which consisted of three revolver shots fired in quick succession, a pause and three more. The alarmist kept banging away until the machine came or his ammunition gave out. Hearing the alarm the fire laddies rallied at the fire house, harnessed themselves to the machine and trotted off in the direction of the alarm; they always reached the fire in time at least to play on the ruins.

There was one institution that had come down to us from the Spanish founders of the pueblo that was still in full force and effect, and that was the zanja, or open ditch system of water distribution for irrigation. The first communal work that the pobladores did after the ceremony of the founding was over was the construction of the Zanja Madre or Mother ditch.

For a century the maternal zanja and her brood of branches had watered the arable lands within the city limits and even beyond. At the beginning of the second century the zanja system was still in its prime and was one of the city's most prized possessions; and well it might be; it had cost a royal patrimony in pueblo lands. One brief illustration must suffice. Branching off from the Zanja Madre near First and Los Angeles Streets, Zanja No. 6 paralleled Main to near Fifth Street, then it angled in an open channel across Main, Fort (now Broadway), Olive and Hill, now all business streets. It debouched into Central Park at Fifth Street; from there it meandered away out to Adams Street, where it watered the orange groves and vineyards of that rural suburb, now the center of the city's aristocracy.

Where now the alternate jam and rush of street cars, automobiles and motor-cycles vex the traffic officers and keep the pedestrians at the crossing in constant fear and dread, then the bare-footed school boy on a hot summer's day bathed his feet in the flowing waters of the zanja. That zanja was not an important one as zanjas ranked in those days, yet in the light of present land values it ranks as the most costly improvement the city ever made.

A few years before, the City Council had given two of our enterprising citizens a body of city land approximating one hundred acres extending from Main to Grasshopper (now Figueroa) Streets, and lying between Seventh and Ninth Streets, for the construction of that zanja. That land is now in the heart of the new business section and is rapidly rising in value. At a conservative estimate it is worth fifty million dollars. The city authorities at that time considered they had received full value for the few acres they had given away from the royal patrimony of twenty-seven thousand acres of pueblo lands that we had inherited from Mexico or rather, to be historically correct, we had wrested from her by force. Had they foreseen that posterity would plant business blocks where they

planted trees and grow sky scrapers where they grew grain, they might have found some other means of paying for that ditch and thus escaped the wailings and railings of ungrateful posterity over a lost patrimony.

The zanja system once so important has disappeared from our city as completely as if it had never existed. There is no trace on our modern city maps of the course of the Zanja Madre and her branches. No ordinance in our Civic Code metes out punishment to the culprit who pollutes her waters. No autocratic zanjero defies Jupiter Pluvius, God of rain, when he withholds the refreshing showers. Gone, all gone and forgotten, and yet there was a time when the zanja system was the municipality's most valued possession.

I have wandered off into this digression to show that there are fields of local history ungleaned, untouched, and to assure our local historians that the fear of some of our founders that there was not history enough in our city's past to keep their pens busy is unfounded. Had our Society done nothing more than record the wonderful growth and development of Southern California, the founding of its many cities and towns, the passing of systems and customs and the changing of conditions that have taken place in the past thirty-three years, it would deserve well of its constituents.

It has seen the City of Los Angeles expand in area from twenty-seven square miles to three hundred, and to grow in population from fourteen thousand to half a million. When our Society was born, Pasadena, now a city of millionaires, had a post-office and a cross-roads grocery, these and nothing more in the shape of a city.

Long Beach, that seaside metropolis of marvelous growth, was then a burg of a few board houses and was struggling along under the name of Willmore City. It was trying to attract inhabitants by promising to be very, very good and to exclude forever from its domain intoxicating drinks. Its promises were regarded as pipe dreams. How could a city live and thrive without stimulants? There was not then a temperance city in the State.

Our Society has directed its activities and most of its means to the collection and publication of historical papers. In its thirty-three years it has issued thirty-two annuals, aggregating about three thousand pages. We have published nine volumes and have the tenth ready for the press. We have expended about \$4,000 in publication. Of the three hundred monograph papers published, the principal subjects treated upon are history and biography, but the contributors occasionally wander into other fields of literature. Nor are the subjects confined to the district from which we take our Southern California name, but include the whole State and history in general. We have done the work of a State historical society

without the State aid that always goes to such societies. We have never received a nickle from State, County or City.

Our books have a wide circulation. We have distributed about 10,000 copies. Besides their distribution among members, they have gone into England, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Italy and Spain. They have crossed the wide Pacific to Australia and New Zealand. They may be found in the libraries of historical societies and universities in the Dominion of Canada.

Our exchange list in the United States includes many of the leading historical societies, universities and scientific associations. Through exchange we are constantly adding to our library, which now numbers over five thousand titles. Our publications are used for reference in the teaching of local history which has recently been introduced in the Course of Study in our Los Angeles City schools.

In our earlier years we had ambitions that were never realized, and schemes for the upbuilding of our Society that failed. The original by-laws of the Society provided for Standing Committees in History, Geology, Meteorology, Conchology, Botany, Genealogy and Heraldry, Minerology, Entomology and Archaeology. These Committees were supposed to report annually on the work done in their several fields. Four reports were published in the *Annals* of 1890 and 1891. The chairman of the Meteorology Committee proved that the growing of trees will not increase the rainfall, and he of the Geological Committee put out the internal fires and cooled the molten mass at the earth's center. The Chairman of the Genealogy and Heraldry Committee showed the great value of knowing who were your forbears and what titles might be hanging on your family tree. A bluff member of the Committee made one more to the point. He said the Committee had found no scions of royalty in Los Angeles and the only titled gents were Kentucky Colonels. His report was considered an insult to the numerous generals and judges who out-ranked the colonels. An amendment to the By-Laws put the Committees in the discard.

Another of our activities that failed was an effort to secure files of all the newspapers published in Southern California. We entered into an agreement with the proprietors of the papers to exchange publications, we to give copies of our *annals* for files of their papers. We soon had daily and weekly papers from Inyo County to San Diego and from Arizona to the sea coast coming regularly. Our object was to bind these in volumes and thus secure histories of all the cities and towns of the Southland. The papers kept coming, but the money to bind them did not materialize. They stacked to the ceiling and weighed tons on the floors of the room where they were stored. Five times I superintended the removal of

this mass of papers, then I donated them to the Public Library. A new librarian turned them back upon us.

About four years ago I dumped them into the basement of the Museum of History. There, with the boxed remains of saber-toothed tigers, giant sloths, mastodons and other antediluvians that have come over from the scientific department of the Museum they rest in peace. Some of these papers would be valuable as curios. They contain the ancient history of some of the cities of the boom that perished and left no ruins. They existed on paper only or in the imagination of their promoters. Our efforts to secure a library of newspaper files reacted on the files of our own publications. Our exchange exhausted our supply of our annuals from 1885 to 1890, which compose our first volume. In the twenty-five years that I have acted as Secretary and Curator I have had numerous requests for that first volume. An eastern university has a standing offer of \$3.00 for one of these annuals, a pamphlet of 43 pages, to complete its file of our publications.

Of the historical value of our publications it is not for me to make an estimate. Our aim is to publish original matter in preference to learned disquisitions of historical questions. Of the nineteen documents from the Sutro Collection translated by George Butler Griffin, a former president, and composing Vol. II of our publications, seventeen had never before been printed. They are copies of original historical material obtained from the *Archivo General de Indias* at Seville, Spain, by Mr. Sutro.

We made three efforts to secure a hall of our own before we succeeded. The first was in 1892. We joined with the Trustees of the Public Library and induced the City Council to call a bond election to vote a bond issue of \$50,000 to build a library building in Central Park, we to have rooms in it. The election was called. Then the oratorical freaks that at that time aired their eloquence in that free forum, Central Park, the Silurians who could see no necessity for such a building and the men afraid of taxes all rose up and went to the polls and voted down our scheme.

Our next effort was in 1905. A bill was introduced into the Legislature appropriating \$125,000 to erect a building in Los Angeles to be used jointly by the newly created Appellate Court and the Historical Society. It passed both houses of the Legislature and went to the Governor (Pardee). We kept the telegraph wires hot with appeals for his signature to the bill, but he finally vetoed it. Our third effort was in conjunction with the County Supervisors. The Museum of History, Science and Art located in Exposition Park was completed in 1912, and our library and collection moved into it. We have one wing of the building 50 by 100 feet, with a main floor, a balcony and a basement. The basement is filled with our



boxed newspapers and the caged remains of Silurians from the Brea pits, west of the city, but they are not dangerous. They do not vote like those that killed our library scheme long ago.

By not having a permanent place for our collections, we lost a golden opportunity to secure a valuable collection of curios, historical relics and Spanish manuscripts which were more plentiful and more easily obtained in our earlier years than now. To six different places we moved our collection while in the Court House and County building. Its last resting place before it went to the Museum of History was a dark basement under the Bridge of Sighs, a causeway that leads from the jail to the Hall of Justice, over which criminals pass to judgment.

Such is the story of the life and activities of one historical society, from infancy to mature years. What its future may be, the founders leave to the rising generation—that intangible thing that is forever rising but seems never to get up.

The life of a society is very similar to that of an individual. It begins with a struggle for existence and keeps it up through life. It has its successes and its failures; its trials and its triumph; its ambitions that are not always realized; and its hopes that do not materialize; its life may be three score and ten, or more, or it may be the ten or less with the scores left off. Infantile paralysis is often as fatal to societies as to individuals.